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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MONTENEGRIN INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM: CAMPAIGN
BEGINS IN EARNEST

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY

Ref: Belgrade 575

11. (SBU) Summary: The past week saw the referendum campaigns begin in earnest, with billboards, TV spots, and - for the pro-Union bloc - a large public rally. The pro-Union bloc continued its focus on alleged improprieties by the GoM (and media). The GoM published a Declaration on Independence, and a Declaration on Relations with Serbia. Poloffs visited the north and far north of Montenegro to discuss the upcoming vote. The USG will register 14 teams to monitor the vote. End summary.

The Campaign Begins

12. (U) TV spots and billboards began to appear for both sides last week. The pro-Union bloc ads state "No - Montenegro is not for sale," continuing its theme that the GoM and PM Djukanovic are corrupt and tying into its allegations that Djukanovic supporters are buying ID cards. The pro-Independence bloc counters with "Yes - For the Montenegro We Love." The pro-Union bloc held a large, traditional rally on April 17 in Mojkovac (central Montenegro) to formally kick off their campaign. The pro-Independence bloc announced it would defer such rallies until closer to the May 21 vote.

Pro-Union Bloc Meets with USG

13. (SBU) Pro-Union bloc leader Socialist People's Party (SNP) president Predrag Bulatovic met with Ambassador Polt and Podgorica principal officer on April 13; Bulatovic and People's Party (NS) president Predrag Popovic had a follow-up meeting with P.O. on April 17. (Details septel). The leaders continued to stress a wide range of alleged GoM and DPS (Democratic Party of Socialists - led by PM Djukanovic) campaign violations - from the mundane (PM using GoM and not party cars to go to events) to serious - centering on allegations that the DPS has already bought 5,000 ID cards with the end goal to buy 20,000, supposedly to suppress voter turnout (Montenegro has 470,000 voters). The bloc also complained that Slovak Ambassador Lipka, who heads the Republic Referendum Commission, "is siding with the GoM" by not breaking deadlocks about pro-Union allegations filed with the otherwise politically evenly split commission. Bulatovic noted that when challenged by the Consulate over inclusion of the Radicals (headed by indicted war criminal Vojislav) Seselj in the pro-Union bloc, the bloc "sided with America."

GoM Publishes Declarations

¶4. (U) The GoM published a Declaration on Independence, spelling out the rights of citizens after independence. On April 13, the GoM adopted a Declaration on Relations with the Republic of Serbia after gaining Independence. The latter commits Montenegro to open borders with Serbia, and guarantees to Serbian citizens all the rights enjoyed by Montenegrins, except voting. The GoS dismissed the declarations as "political marketing." The pro-Union bloc opined to the Consulate that the declarations were another instance of improper and even illegal involvement of the GoM in the referendum campaign.

The View from Beyond the Capital

¶5. (U) Poloff met with political leaders from northern Montenegro (Zabljak and Pljevlja) April 11-12 to discuss the region and the upcoming referendum, which dominates political discourse. They described their region as economically depressed, predominantly ethnic-Serb and aging rapidly. They expressed worries that an independent Montenegro would hamper their ties to neighboring Serbia and further erode their precarious economic position. Both regions are likely to vote strongly in favor of the State Union. [Comment: Although Zabljak is a small municipality, Pljevlja has the fifth largest municipal population in Montenegro and will be a key voting district on May 21. End Comment]. The leaders said that while tensions are rising, they did not anticipate any significant violence surrounding the referendum.

¶6. (SBU) The DPS (pro-Independence) mayor of Montenegro's

BELGRADE 00000615 002 OF 002

second largest city, Niksic, told poloff April 14 that he expects his city to vote in favor of independence, with 58 to 62.5 percent of voters saying "Yes." His Chief of Staff was more cautious, predicting 55 to 56 percent "Yes." The Mayor won election in a runoff in April 2005 with 54.4 percent; 21 of Niksic's 41 councilors are from pro-Independence parties.

Monitoring Plans

¶7. (U) The Consulate has requested that the GoM accredit 14 teams to monitor the referendum vote on May 21. Each team has two Americans (drawn from the Consulate, Embassy and beyond) and local support staff. The Consulate will staff a central coordination cell throughout the day. Polls open at 8 a.m. local, closing 13 hours later at 9 p.m. Initial approximate results may possibly be available as early as 10 p.m., but a close vote will result in a long night.

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